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ISIS-Linked Digital Activism and Sympathy- Raising on Behalf of ISIS Women Held in SDF Camps

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📁 Research Reports

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As the ISIS foreign women languish in the overcrowded Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] administered camps of Al Roj and Al Hol housing

without adequate and regular access to health care, food and potable water, their endurance to live in these constantly deteriorating conditions and commitment to the Islamic *sabar* (i.e. perseverance and persistence) that ISIS taught appear to be withering. This is evidenced by the many hopeless women on Telegram group chats who continue to vent their frustrations online. One posting of an ISIS woman in the camps stands out, as it states, “Living under Dawlah (when discussed in the context of ISIS’s last strong hold of Baghouz) was never a struggle. What is not easy is living under the oppression of SDF in the camps.” Posts like this show the ISIS women frustrated by captivity, but also, as is often the case for those who have lived under oppression, forgetting in the face of present hardships the past hardships of tyranny. This woman in particular appears to have forgotten the constant bombardments and snipers that often indiscriminately targeted civilians, women and their families living in dug-out holes under the ground with only a piece of plastic as roofing in order to avoid bombs when housing became scarce in Baghouz, not to mention those who literally starved to death when the food supply was cut off and basic supplies became scarce and food prices became astronomical. Many ISIS members who survived [Baghouz interviewed by the first author](#) recall extreme hardships and now cry over their dead and injured who fell in

Baghouz. Foreign ISIS members who survived all the way to Baghouz also often vented [in research interviews with the first author](#), their anger at the Iraqi and Syrian leaders who did not suffer, but had Kia trucks, money and gold and food stores, including American Snickers candy bars and Coca Colas. They remain angry at the many of the local ISIS leaders who escaped before the foreigners were finally allowed to surrender and express feelings of resentment that they were used by these ISIS leaders. Perhaps this woman is one of the privileged who did not face such hardships in Baghouz, or perhaps it is a representation of just how hard the camps have become.

For instance, as depicted above, one wife of an ISIS fighter who was “martyred” in Baghouz states

that the real oppression she faces is in the camp.

That said, for some ISIS women, the wounds of losing their loved ones in their last ISIS vestige of Baghouz to the bloodshed of attacks from all sides, including the U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, are still fresh as they continue expressing feelings of vengeance, lucidly sketching details on Facebook about their last days of staying underground before their eventual surrender to the SDF. This painful throwback to the past for some pro-ISIS women appears to trigger and reinforce loyalty toward the brutal terror group. The importance of clinging on to their last stand is also reflected in the naming of one funding channel as “Baghouz,” which narrates stories about the martyrdom of the mujahedeen to garner more sympathy and support.

The hardships for the ISIS women and their children detained in Camp al Hol are real. For instance, water supplies to the region keep getting cut [off from the pumping station held by Turkish-backed rebel groups](#), meaning that water tankers deliver murky, questionable water. Likewise, fresh food stores can only be had through purchase, meaning the women need money to buy such. Likewise, with the transfer of women from al Hol to al Roj Camp, many of the ISIS women have become very concerned about the strict and controlling new regimes in Camp Roj, where contraband telephones are being confiscated, women are under stricter control and not allowed to wear black burkas or cover their faces with niqab anymore as depicted in the screen shot below:

Many of the women posting from al Hol, and those who have messaged the first author from al Roj, also know that the latter is not an easy location from which to escape. Indeed, some claim that the new more restrictive section in Camp al Roj is the black hole out of which you can't come out. As a result, they see their escape from Camp al Hol in the near futures as their only chance to attain what they perceive as freedom. Hence their desperate attempts to hide and try to evade attempts to transfer them. In fact, while the [SDF is undertaking the transfer of approximately 400 ISIS women and their children to the newly fortified and robustly monitored security extension of al Roj camp](#), the ISIS women in Turkish language on Facebook continue to groan about the recurrent SDF night raids in Camp

al Hol, which are taking place to find women who are trying to evade being transferred to Camp al Roj by hiding in other women's tents. The transfers, according to the ISIS women's postings, have triggered renewed fears for these women of the permanent communication blackout that may occur when contraband telephones are no longer as available in camp al Roj, dashed their residual hope of being released by the remaining ISIS fighters "breaking down the prison walls" or of escaping from Camp al Hol via smuggling, as had occurred on a weekly basis until a recent SDF crackdown started detecting and stopping them. These ISIS women's concerns in both camps, shared on social media and messaging apps, are shared below:

Distressed ISIS women from the al Hol camp claim in Turkish and Russian language Telegram groups that they haven't heard from the families that have been recently transferred there, thus they realize that there most likely is a much more serious security regime in Camp al Roj, which is indeed the case, and that there will be a communication blackout once transferred. Pro-ISIS women on Facebook also complain about what they call restrictions of religious freedoms, with the SDF enforcing a ban on black niqabs and burkas in the new sections of Camp al Roj, something which makes it much easier for the camp authorities to keep control as well as keep track of the identities and of these foreign women. It should be noted that a member of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria's

(AANES) security forces was stabbed in the back by one woman in a group of women all dressed in black burqas and niqabs and it was not at first apparent who had carried out the stabbing, thus there are very real and pressing security concerns for being able to readily identify the women who have up to now been allowed to cover their faces.

The women in Camp al Hol were also registered in recent months with biomarkers and photographs, an overdue process after the chaotic overcrowding that happened with the sudden influx of ISIS women with the fall of Hajin and Baghouz into Camp al Hol.

The women posting from Camp al Hol further complain that the SDF allegedly tasked other non-European ISIS women also held in the camp to

track the tent numbers and the ID cards of European women, this in turn to bargain for the former's release from the camps. But this, according to the ISIS women's posts, turned out to be an ill-fated move, as when the pro-ISIS women in the camp learned about this abortive scheme, they turned hyper-cautious, hired a hacker to unmask this plot and across all channels started disseminating "awareness campaigns" about the suspicious intelligence agents of SDF working from amongst the women in the camp. This dubious propaganda campaign put out by the ISIS women also promotes viewing UN aid organizations, construction workers, shopkeepers and medical personnel through suspicious eyes and labeling them as intelligence agents, working on the ground for the SDF. Indeed, as the moderate women from the al Hol "annex," where foreign ISIS women and their children are held, express their reservations against sharia law and have been caught helping SDF with gathering intelligence in alleged hopes of their release, the cohort of other radical mothers try their best to ostracize these women. They also attempt to break them down through dismantling their tents and burning their belongings. In one of the posts, an admin on Telegram indirectly claims that in this way "other sisters" gave a "befitting reply to the enemies of Allah."

As a part of these awareness campaigns,
depicted above, these ISIS women launched a

new propaganda video warning of how an Iraqi counter-terrorism agent, masquerading as an ISIS smuggler, failed to extract information and money from a woman who wanted to be smuggled out of the camp. After learning about this betrayal, some pro-ISIS women also fumed at other women in the camp for letting out sensitive information about other “European sisters” and “selling their imam to Kurdish apostates.” Some posted of how these angered sisters had stormed in the tents of the women who had acted as informers and set ablaze their belongings and clothes after which the next morning the guards came to the scene to restore order in Camp al Hol. The dangers in this camp cannot be underestimated [as killings happen regularly](#). Below in the screenshot a pro-ISIS woman in the Iraqi section of Al Hol camp states that a “high level PKK agent” in the camp was recently killed.

A 6-minute video titled *Exposing Iraqi Rafidis* (an ISIS derogatory term for Shia Muslims) widely circulated across all funding pages and also by decentralized funders and their fake apps amplifies the already heightened threat perceptions among ISIS women in Camp al Hol. This heightened awareness among the ISIS women might also hamper the intelligence gathering of the SDF as more women have now understood the danger of revealing their purported identities to smugglers promising escapes who might actually work as undercover SDF agents. The periodic surfacing of videos of women getting caught on camera in the water tanker smuggling schemes, some released by the security forces of the AANES, further adds to this trust deficit.

Their heightened vigilance and awareness of their precarious surroundings particularly with the security crackdown and transfers to the stricter Camp al Roj, the constant attempts at escaping and the renewed attempts of prison breaks show how the male prisoners and foreign women are either completely desperate or still recalcitrant to come to terms with the harsh reality of accepting their life as prisoners. As the ISIS women in Camp al Hol and their helpers in the West reinvigorate their efforts to fundraise to help them to make their way out of camps, their male counterparts, who have also been detained in deplorable conditions in Hasakah's AlSina prison seem to have reached their breaking point as well and in recent weeks have [attempted prison breaks or escapes by digging tunnels with the help of metal pieces procured from damaging their metal bedframes.](#)

One recently stood up GoFundMe fundraiser circulated in ISIS-linked Facebook groups and in messaging apps doesn't make specific mention of the camps or of ISIS women but instead innocently proclaims that it will send money for "providing the sisters and their children with safe and secured shelter from the oppressed situation, clean food and help them with other daily basic needs they have." However, given it is being circulated in ISIS groups alongside photos of beheadings that are glorified, it's more likely that this new donation drive kickstarted by "Fisabillillah Sisters" who hail from New York City with an ambitious target of soliciting donations of up to \$13,000 is raising money for attempts at ex-filtering ISIS women and children from the detention camps. The fundraiser, which

attempts to appear as a social cause, claims that women in the camps in Syria are “being raped, tortured, children snatched away and many of them literally dig the bins to feed a morsel of food to the orphans under their care.” Appealing to sympathy and duty of Western Muslims the fundraisers write, “All of you brothers and sisters who claim to love the prophet’s (saw) sunnah, for how long will you keep on creating hashtags #savetheummah and not change the situation of the oppressed with your hands when it’s at the ease of your fingertips today?”

Rumor mills operated from inside Camp al Hol by pro-ISIS women churning dubious and concerning news about the SDF’s conduct with women and the view of the new security camp extensions in al

Roj as a dungeon have added to a heightened urgency among these pro-ISIS women to devise quick and cautious ways to make their ways out of the camps before they are transferred to their new camp destination. Interestingly, where the women from Camp al Hol label this transfer as a “de-radicalization move of Kuffar,” the Kurdish officials as reported by Rudaw reveal that al Hol residents who were chosen after they were carefully monitored by the authorities to transfer [were deemed “less dangerous.”](#) However, the ISIS women themselves monitored in discussions on social media and in messaging apps by Mona Thakkar of ICSVE insist that the transferred women are those who violated the camp rules (through their violent actions by attacking, stealing, stabbing or talking to ISIS). It’s unclear how the decisions to transfer are actually being made but according to the ISIS women it’s based on dangerousness. If true, however, dangerousness may decrease in Camp al Roj as they are no longer allowed to hide behind black niqabs and communicate with the outside over contraband phones.

The concern of the treatment of these women and their children during their reshuffling/resettlement to al Roj was also highlighted by the Australian Save the Children director Mat Tinkler as he took to Twitter to raise his opposition to forced transfers, which grew out of his dolor after hearing of [10 Australian kids and mothers being](#)

snatched and handcuffed and their belongings being destroyed.

In this regard, the camp residents have repeatedly been perturbed by the guards' occasional mishandling of small children. However, these complaints must be placed in the context of an overtaxed SDF dealing with understaffing in a chaotic and overcrowded camp in which the women are hiding and also often armed, as all have access to kitchen knives that have in the past been used to stab security personnel.

It's also noteworthy that the women who escaped from al Hol and made their way to Idlib have also been at the forefront of flashy funding efforts pleading to the ummah to come forward to give sadaqah (charity) for their sisters. But among

those who escaped and sit ensconced in Idlib are many who hate ISIS and have entered into arguments with staunch takfiri women by being disgruntled about the group making bold statements like “I was till the end of Dawah and Baghdadi left us in prison while being safe in Idlib and we were under bombs.” They further lament that ISIS killed its own brothers and left them in the lurch. The sarcastic response to this by a pro-ISIS woman was to ask whether she received protection from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the jihadist group controlling Idlib.

Female ISIS stalwarts from the camp, and elsewhere, whose Facebook profiles are usually littered with their emotional posts about their painful life as captives, also took some time out to post in celebration of the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and called on waging global jihad, temporarily muting their agony into the few seconds of fervent rage and happiness.

In summary, it's important to note that as these women tread carefully amid new security protocols, devising new ways and employing sophisticated strategies to make their hushed exit from the camps, one thing is clear. They have been successful, as was ISIS itself in years past, in coming up with convincing explanations to garner assistance from all over the world by

weaponizing principal Islamic obligations to rally a reasonable amount of support for their cause.

These fundraisers and the fact that ISIS women in the camps still manage to communicate from them and garner sympathy for being held prisoners create a worrisome hangover of ISIS's cruel Caliphate, with continued sympathy for its members still extended as far as Australia, the UK and U.S., where it appears that stalwart ISIS supporters continue to channel funding appeals on Facebook for their sisters thousands of miles away. This alone should be a strong argument for speedy repatriation efforts by Western countries to end the ability of ISIS to tug at the heartstrings of new and old supporters to still act from afar on behalf of this heinous group.

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Anne Speckhard, Ph.D., is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism ([ICSVE](#)) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She has interviewed over 700 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the

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fighters, wives and children. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counterterrorism expert and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, the EU Commission and EU Parliament, European and other foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA, and FBI and appeared on CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, CBC and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. She regularly writes a column for Homeland Security Today and speaks and publishes on the topics of the psychology of radicalization and terrorism and is the author of several books, including *Talking to Terrorists*, *Bride of ISIS*, *Undercover Jihadi* and *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*.

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